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The CAUSES and REASONS of the present  
Declension among the Congregational  
Churches in London and the Country;

I N A

*Independent*

# LETTER

Addressed to the

Pastors, Deacons and Members

OF THOSE

CHURCHES.

BY ONE OF THAT DENOMINATION.

Interspersed with Reflections on

METHODISM AND SANDIMANIANISM.

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Αλαπῆλοι, μὲ παντὶ πνεύματι πειθεύετε, ἀλλὰ δοκιμαζέτε τὰ πνεύ-  
ματα, εἰ ἐκ τῆς Θεοῦ εἰσὶν---I John iv. 1.

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L O N D O N:

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The Cause and Reasons of the present  
Distress among the Agricultural  
Classes in London and the County

# LETTER

ADDRESSED TO

Patrons, Descendants and Members

OF THE



CHURCH

BY ONE OF THE

METHODIST AND SANCTIMANISM

Author of the 'History of the Methodist Church in America' and 'The History of the Methodist Church in England'.

LONDON

Printed for J. Johnson and B. Davies, in  
St. Paul's Church-yard.

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## LETTER, &c.

BRETHREN,

**P**ERMIT one of your hearty friends, to set before you, the general state of your denomination. He has no other view in writing this epistle, than the revival of that faith and discipline, which he thinks most conformable to the New Testament. The true congregational church order, is what he thinks most conformable to the gospel, best calculated to support true liberty, and best suited to the edification of Christians in faith and holiness. Let me beseech you then to read my Letter patiently, and if I have, upon the whole, given

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a just



a just representation of things among us, let me be heard, if not, condemned.

Your assemblies in London and the country are much shattered; I apprehend by two sects, the Methodists and Glassites. In *several*, separations have already taken place, in *more* the contention is begun. So that between these two monsters, you are very near being devoured.

2 Some of your ministers have already left you, *more* are branded with the mark of the northern heresy; and the violent measures pursued against them, will oblige them, if not stopped, to drop all connexions with you. These, let me tell you, are not some of the least considerable for integrity and ability neither, as many of you know. Besides this, numbers of the most sensible laymen among us have their eyes open to conviction—read and examine, and are apprehensive, they have been too long in the clouds of Mysticism and Quakerism, and are now desirous of breathing in a clearer air.

Our



Our artful priests perceive the leaven operating and spreading in town and country, in spite of their solemn censures, and most violent attempts to restrain it. Their interest and influence is in danger. Their popularity affected with a deep and dangerous wound; and instead of endeavouring to heal it, by the gentle remedies of acknowledgment, argument, and conviction, they apply the desperate caustics of passion and anathema.

Amidst these debates, the Glaslites strive with the malecontents; tell them, the apostolic authority can only be followed amongst themselves, and that there is no such thing as walking according to the commandments of Jesus Christ, in any other societies but their own. And after applying certain passages of the revelation to themselves, they maintain, that they are the only persons who keep the word of God, and the testimony of Jesus Christ; and that all other ministers and churches but theirs, are antichristian. As soon as the candidates have heated themselves with a blaze of

zeal, which the opposition they have met with is good fuel for, to condemn all other Christians, (the principal and most distinguishing qualification required) they become stanch Glassites; and are likely to continue so, as they can worship with no other Christians, without being excommunicated ipso facto. A fine maxim of policy!—Whether these remarks are true or not, I leave the Glassites and you to judge. I can prove they are, from facts, or else I never was more mistaken.

But to my point—Upon reflection, it appears to me, that the declension, fickleness, and confusion, which have taken place amongst us, are owing chiefly to the following causes.

First,

To the influence of Methodism.

Whatever people may say to the contrary, this has been very injurious to the dissenting interest. By the dissenting interest, I mean a separation from the established church for conscience

conscience sake, and out of regard to certain principles and practices, which appear to us scriptural. And I apprehend it can only be maintained, by a full conviction of those principles and a strict observance of those practices, in united assemblies \*.

Methodism, as far as I am able to judge, in every form of it, is quite opposite to this conviction and unity. Mr. J—n W—y's principles as professed in several towns of this kingdom, are nothing less nor more, one thing alone excepted, than Quakerism veiled, and I fear, with no slender covering of jesuiti-

\* As for those dissenters who consider their denomination as a political faction, I leave them to defend it. Many of the dissenting ministers have complained bitterly, in many of their performances, of the severity of admission into the established church, by subscription and a solemn oath. Especially as the articles now stand. I object to all manner of human imposition as much as they. But when I see them expressing their wishes, that the terms were more moderate, I think 'tis no difficult matter to understand them. They want livings, to be independent of their people. But are these the sons of liberty, that would deprive the people of election or rejection?



cal policy \*. That this grand leader of a sect is not sincere, I would not take upon me absolutely to assert, as God only is judge of the heart. But how he can approve of such works of grace upon the soul, as I can demonstrate by the most indubitable evidences he has approved, treating them as the genuine productions of the Holy Ghost, I am at a loss to reconcile, in him a man of some learning and acuteness, with any principles of common honour or honesty. But 'tis to himself whether he stands or falls in the judgment of a higher being, to whom I leave him. I would not hurt a hair of his head. Let him, I say, have his full liberty to go on proselyting. I will maintain my right of judging of every man's overt actions and sayings.

As for Mr. W—f—d's party, and his adherents among the clergy, they are most

\* The thing excepted above is priestcraft. And if positivity, imperiousness, subtilty, impatience of contradiction, and an avowed right of dictating in every thing concerning his preachers and societies, be priestcraft, reader, I can tell thee of no character that abounds more with it.

certainly

certainly a set of people, more governed by strong feelings than plain scripture sentiments. Their faith appears too evidently to be something different from a belief of scripture truth, and their edification, placed too much, in strong bodily sensations.

The scripture of truth, is treated by them as a dead letter, a vain ineffectual thing; and regeneration, as nothing more than a positive infusion of a certain something within; which, like Robert Barclay's divine light, is felt, but cannot be explained.

It will justly be demanded, how I came by this opinion of Methodism? I answer, by reading the writings, hearing the sermons, and conversing with the followers, of the two great leaders of this sect. I have always observed the latter to be, a sure method of knowing the spirit and tendency of the religion professed amongst any party. In their books it appears in its most favourable and engaging aspect; but in conversation with their steady adherents and warmest supporters, it is discovered in its morning dress and true state, undisguised: Especially  
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when one converses not only with the weak, but the strong, which, in justice to every party, we ought.

But whether this account of them be true or not, their irregularities in attending divine worship, are too manifest to be denied.

The novelty of a voice—the multitude of attendants—or the gestures of a noted preacher—these, these are the grand rules of edification. Their stated places are left on a Lord's day, they run hither and thither, just as report or fancy lead them; and 'tis very seldom you can find them settled in one place, to one people, and one ministry, for any continuance.

The whole of religion seems with many of them to consist, in a few devout raptures, the hearing of two sermons every day, a good deal of gossiping about conversions, manifestations, the heavenly gift, Pisgah views of Christ and glory, and the condemning other Christians for dulness and lukewarmness. Whilst at the same time, reading the bible, instructing their children, regulating their household, the being diligent



gent in business serving the Lord, and the cultivating the temper and character according to the commandments of Christ in the several relations of life, are rather deemed low and trifling things, of no great moment in the Christian profession.

The writer of this letter appeals to the London ministers for the proof of these observations. He dares venture to affirm, that they have long since discovered, the things he has mentioned, to be truly characteristic of Methodism in general.—And he might presume to ask them, whether they have not known some considerable congregations blown into irreconcilable parties by the impetuous wind of methodistic zeal? Have not many of your hearers left you, and *as many* been rendered inconstant, by this moral contagion? You must know, many of you, that it has devoured your assemblies, like a desperate consumption, and left you but a mere skeleton of a church and congregation. For more than twenty years past, it has thinned your auditories, broke in upon the order of your churches, and infected

numbers of your hearers with a phrenical kind of zeal, that has raised them above sentiment and instruction.

I doubt not but there are numbers of serious persons among the Methodists, and am assured that their preachers have raised deep concern in vast numbers, who were thoughtless about God and futurity. But I am as certainly assured, that this concern and serious attention, have been directed in general, to the cultivation of a different religion from that contained in the New Testament.

Secondly,

Another reason of that declension and confusion which subsists in our assemblies, is the noisy-empty popularity of some of our preachers.

Sound, without sense—gesture, without meaning—heat, without light or sentiment—and a peculiar savoury canting tone, that affects numbers of ignorant people in the same powerful manner, as the *By ob!* of the nurse does the infant in the cradle—  
these,

these, these have been the distinguishing qualifications of some of the most popular men amongst us, especially in the great city.

We see the effect of this kind of preaching, not only in the characters of the zealous hearers, whilst their favourite man lives, but it is more visible still, if he happens to die. Then they are scattered hither and thither, having lost the charm; and a man of the very same principles and of better learning, sense, and a more uniform character, is totally disregarded as not having the spirit, because God has not given him the same brazen lungs as his predecessor had.

Thirdly,

The systematic Aristotelian way of preaching, is another cause of our disorder.

I know every man must have a system. Paul evidently had in his epistle to the Romans. But every man of sense will see that his is of a very different form, from that of a Mark or a Turretine. In his there is nothing metaphysical. Nothing of occult qualities.



No curious distinctions about the order of nature and order of time. No absurd definitions and splittings of the indivisible principle the soul and its operations. Not a syllable of acts and mystic principles within. No distinctions without a difference. But all is plain, popular, and in language that is easy to be understood.

In his writings we never find the silly distinction between the knowledge of the head, and that of the heart, as if man had two souls, one in his head and the other in his belly. Nor does he insist much, or at all, upon the Aristotelian distinction of speculative and practical knowledge. In the view of the apostles, if men that profess the Christian religion do not walk as Christ walked, the truth is not in them, neither speculatively, nor practically, nor mystically\*.

None of the important doctrines of the gospel are uninfluential. They are not

\* Can we believe any principles really and fully, without being affected by them, (whilst the attention of the mind is fixed upon them) according to their real nature and tendency? Let every man examine his own mind, and he'll soon determine this question.

viewed

viewed aright, but corrupted, if they do not purify the conscience. There is, as the celebrated Bengelius says, in his *Gnomon*, a salutary virtue always goes with them: If they are from God, they must be doctrines according to godliness.

Besides, according to the systematic way of preaching that I am exploding, the preacher has a principal regard, when he takes his text, to what his favourite system says, and not to the scope and intention of the sacred writer. His proofs and arguments are from thence, and the grand design of the inspired paragraph is soon lost, if ever mentioned. In short, when I hear a man that has drawn his sentiments from his own perusal of the scripture, concerning the universal degeneracy of human nature, and our restoration to the favour and likeness of God, by the influence of the Holy Ghost through the conviction of gospel truth, there appears to me to be as much difference between his style and manner of representing subjects, and that of the scholastic systematic, as there is (pardon the comparison) between the walk of  
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of the most easy unaffected young gentleman in St. James's Park, and that of a decrepit old prisoner, crawling and twisting along within the walls of Newgate with his chains trailing after him.

I forbear to mention the confounding multiplicity of divisions—the spinning out a plain subject to a most tedious length—the dry verbal criticism—the lifeless and stiff delivery—all which are too common and notorious in many of our preachers. I pass on to another cause of our present disorders.

Fourthly,

The neglect of our discipline.

Our churches are like fields, or cities without walls.—The terms of admission have been neither scriptural, distinguishing, nor calculated to promote unity or mutual edification. A long story about the dealings of God with the soul—in the breaking of jack-lines—losing and getting in trade—in the overturning of hackney coaches—in visions—dreams—secret whispers of the spirit  
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to the soul—in the powerful impression, but presumptuous application, of texts of scripture—in deep debasings and high exaltings of the soul, and then, to add no more, in its finally rolling itself upon Christ by a wonderful effort: a relation of this kind, I say, which any designing person could imitate, has been the grand criterion of church communion. Not that I would have you think I despise the least incidents in life, which providence might use as excitements to serious attention, and as introductory to the knowledge of the truth. Nor would I be understood to despise all feeling and fervor and heart work in religion. What I reject and condemn, is the laying a stress upon any circumstances or inward feelings whatsoever, short of the saving knowledge of Jesus, and the genuine influence of it upon the heart and life.

Instead of asking candidates, What views they had of themselves and the redemption of Jesus, and what the influence of them upon the temper and life? the grand stress

has

has been laid upon inward workings and certain kinds of feelings.

Now any man that has ever thought at all about futurity, let him be ever so ignorant of Christianity, will have a long story to tell, about his qualms and fears, his restraints and falls, his elevations and hopes. A Jew, or Turk, or Pagan, that has his God and his standard of worship, will ever have something of this kind to relate. And according to his agitations and elevations, or his depressions and coolness, he'll think himself better or worse, influenced by the spirit of his God, or not. Therefore any kind of inward workings whatsoever, without the knowledge of the truth as in Jesus, ought not to be a proper term for Christian communion.

The workings of mens hearts are best known to us by their professed faith and practice.

The neglect of church discipline has been too manifest also, in the partiality that has been shewn to the rich. A rich man, a great subscriber, has never been reproved  
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for his irregularities. His measures and conduct, let them have been ever so contrary to the laws of Christ, have been connived at for fear of losing the subscription. One or two of these in a church, have by degrees carried all before them. Ministers have made them their principal counsellors. Hereupon, perhaps, they have enlarged their contributions. Next they have become officers. Then they have commenced devout Bashaws, "This measure must not be followed, that must." A poor brother of sense, soundness in the faith, and of a good character, calmly remonstrates, "He is saucy and impertinent, quarrelsome and litigious, and is asked, What he subscribes?" As if it was taken for granted, that the influence and authority of a man in a Christian church, should be just in proportion to the weight of his purse. Am I describing a fact or a fiction? Are there any such instances or not? Judge ye, my brethren.

That law of Jesus, Matt. xviii. 15. and following verses, without which christianity can never be supported in churches, has

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been



been almost totally neglected. Hence have arisen suspicions, reproaches, parties, separations, and confusion. The unruly have not been duly warned, the wandering and unsteady exhorted, nor the feeble and disconsolate strengthened and comforted.

There has been no union of spiritual interests. The chief bands of our societies have been family connections, the promotion of trade, large finances, or some other worldly ties.—Not the love of truth, not a mutual affection terminating in the scripture hope of Christ's second coming without sin unto salvation.

Give me leave also to mention the irregular attendance of church-members. Is it not a notorious fact, that numbers in London are never seen with the church, but one afternoon in the month, to partake of the Lord's supper? The other Sundays in the month are devoted perhaps promiscuously to a M—d—n, a R—m—n, a W—f—d, or else to a country excursion, or some other entertainment, which business would not admit on any other day of the week. How-  
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ever it cannot be known to the society, what the spirit, temper and character of the person are. There can be little harmony and love in peoples eating a bit of bread and drinking a sup of wine together, if they are ignorant of each others views and intentions in doing it. I'll not dwell upon the characters of your half-day hearers, your orator-admirers, and heretic-hunters. I'll trouble you no more with these things, your own acquaintance with the congregational churches in London, will afford you more instances than I have touched upon.

I'll only observe, that a society of men, although separating from a national church, governed by the rich and politic, principally supported by the generous donations of the deceased, tied together by family connexions, adorned with their best clothes, and meeting once a week to hear a man whom they respect, is no more calculated to hold up the purity of Christ's doctrines and precepts to the world, than any corporation-club in the kingdom. 'Tis a very faction, a mere worldly society, and there are no

traces of a Christian church in the form and policy of it. Who can ever think they are desirous of forming themselves according to the New Testament?

Fifthly,

The absurd method of education, that has prevailed in our academies, appears to me to be another cause of our present declension.

As if divine principles could not be sufficiently learnt from revelation, the system of some dull metaphysical divine, must first be introduced, and made forsooth the text. I dont say the standard, though some think it. There is no ridicule can be too strong, or satire too keen upon this practice. What, is not revelation clear enough, now the canon of scripture is compleated, to make the man of God perfect? Has God inspired any professor of the former or present age, to write a clearer revelation, than that in the New Testament? Or has he authorized any one to write an appendix to it? Is it not as absurd to introduce pupils first to a human system,



system, that they may understand the will of God, as it would be, to tell a person that wanted to know what kind of water ran from such a spring, that he must go miles down the rivulet, and taste it as it runs through some dirty channel?

What is all that the most accomplished tutors can dictate, to constitute divines, in comparison with the teaching of the Holy Ghost by his own revelation? Let pupils be made well acquainted with the languages, antiquities, geography, customs and history of the nations and times where the inspired men wrote——let them be well read in the sacred volume itself——and let them know the particular and grand design of each writer from their own perusal of them——and then you may trust them without fear, to what commentators and polemical writers have said. But till then, 'twill be ridiculous to perplex and muddle them, with any human systems whatsoever.

The man that understands and breathes the spirit of the New Testament, must be a good Christian and an excellent divine.

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There is nothing else necessary to qualify him for public usefulness, if he has but a tolerable share of natural abilities, but the blessing of God. His being well versed in systems, creeds, fathers, will never qualify him without this. With these he may be well acquainted, and yet either greatly or totally ignorant of the spirit of our Lord's sayings, and the apostolic writings.

Another extreme on the other hand, is the dwelling too long upon ethics, and the external evidences for christianity. These I am sensible are both highly important. But after years reading upon these subjects, I am of opinion, men have been unnecessarily prolix upon them, in the instruction of youth. I deny not the expediency and necessity of the historical and external evidences for christianity, and I value much the indefatigable labours of the great Lardner upon this subject; but it appears to me, that the marks of divinity impressed on the contents of God's own revelation, as upon all his other works, are more striking, convincing, full and compleat, than what arises from

from external evidence.——As to most systems of ethics, it would be easy to shew, that they contain opinions quite repugnant to the character of God given in the scriptures, and the very being of vice and virtue, as they are there described. But this is not now my province.

As to both these methods of education, the result of them is this. The pupils of the former, if they follow their tutors, which genius and integrity, I own, will seldom suffer them to do, come out system-shackled, pert, scholastic, dogmatical, very much unacquainted with the scriptures, ignorantly orthodox, mere zealots for a party, the butt of deists, and the scorn of new-schemers.

The pupils of the latter, are continually clamouring about virtue, liberty, and the eternal nature of things. So that one would think at first there was no right thinking, nor true liberty, nor genuine virtue, but with them. And for these young gentlemen's charity, one cannot but be in love with it. How does it hang upon their melodious tongues! 'Tis the emphatical word almost



most in every sentence. What shall I call it? 'Tis a goddess, or 'tis the summum bonum, or 'tis the very quintessence of heaven upon earth. Their charity, in short, is so good-natured a lady, that she neither frets herself about any sentiments, nor despises any. There is but one character upon earth that is offensive to her, and that will put her in a passion. That is, the man who insists upon it, that revelation was intended to convey some ideas to the mind, which are important to the hope, holiness and happiness of sinful creatures. And as he is strenuous in professing these, and cannot think a man right that rejects them, though he allows him boundless liberty to think and act in his own way, yet madam charity, whenever she meets him, never fails to be in a violent passion with him.

These young gentlemen talk mightily too about freedom of inquiry. 'Tis important, 'tis the glorious privilege of Britons! True it is, and may it ever be so. But why is this so great and inestimable a privilege? Why 'tis answered, because of the discovery  
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of truth. A proper answer. But how can Mistress Truth, and that Lady Charity above-mentioned, be reconciled? Indeed, gentlemen, they are not fit companions—they'll never agree. And if you keep one company and worship her, you must, indeed you must, abandon the other. Truth is venerable, solemn and pointing to the conscience, as well as comforting and supporting to the mind. But the Charity before described, allows of no attention to be paid to it in this view.

I submit it to the consideration of every judicious Christian, whether any thing can be taught better for the support of poor guilty distressed souls, than what is repeatedly inculcated by the apostles in the Acts? And where can any one know more clearly, the import and full meaning of the principles *there* taught, concerning the person, offices, righteousness, and compleat redemption of the Son of God, than by reading his story in the Evangelists? And is it possible for any professor, to discover to us, by any new system, how christians should better live

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christianity

christianity in private in every relation of life, and how they should profess and maintain it in their societies more conformably to the will of Christ, than by reading the apostolic epistles to the churches? Here, here, we may see, how Jesus and his apostles would have christianity observed. The German systematic, and the mere ethical divine, will certainly fall then vastly short of him, who fetches his materials from the forementioned divine writings.

The slavish practice of writing lectures, and after too, sometimes, mere novices in literature and divinity, is highly absurd, as books are so easy to be come at, now printing is come to such perfection. It has a tendency to deaden the spirits, and unnerve a pupil for application. And I have this to observe against it, that of all who have been thus brought up, that I am acquainted with, not one has ever made any good use of them after he has left the academy. But most have thought with indignant resentment on the time spent in them, and have looked upon it as totally lost.

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If a divinity tutor be not a great philosopher, an eminent mathematician, a deep civilian, it may be dispensed with. But if he be not well acquainted with the languages in which the scriptures were first wrote, the customs, manners, and history of the times and nations where they were first published, a pretty ready ecclesiastical historian, and a man of good natural sense, he is by no means equal to his office. I am sensible these accomplishments are nothing, without the upright heart, the fair character, and the truly christian spirit in all its various parts. But I am as sensible, the latter without the former, will never answer the end of such a profession.

Finally,

I would mention the ignorance and enthusiasm that have prevailed in our assemblies.

I know very well our societies are not more so, than others, where there is a kind of zeal among them. But I do not address myself to them. Neither will I say this is the

state of our societies universally, but I will say 'tis too generally so. I am acquainted with many of them in town and country.

### The Bible neglected.

'Tis as great a rarity almost, to find a common professor, so acquainted with the main scope and contents of the sacred books, as to evince to us he has his leading sentiments from thence, as the appearance of a comet. No, any thing must be read on a Lord's day evening but the Bible. This is not savoury enough. Every man and family too have their favourite authors, as the Quakers have their Robert Barclay, and a new sect their Glas and Sandiman. These favourites are thumbed over from beginning to end, whilst the poor Bible lies by as a sealed dry book and dead letter; and the greatest respect that has been shown to it, is to let it stand unperturbed upon the shelf to be fed on by spiders. Or if it be now and then looked into, 'tis only as we would look at a riddle; to see how some ingenious man has interpreted it.

From

From this impious neglect of the Bible, has arose a zealous attatchment to human phraſes, more than to the phraſeology and ſenſe of the ſacred volume.

This vice I am now ſpeaking of, has been countenanced by our never reading the New Teſtament and important parts of the Old, regularly in our public aſſemblies. A baſe omiſſion in perſons, ~~that~~ particularly profeſs to have their doctrines and rules of action from the New Teſtament. In the more private aſſemblings of the brethren, it has too generally been left out, and the vileſt cant about unmeaning feelings ſubſtituted in its ſtead. What, is the Bible the rule of faith and practice or is it not? Can he be a bad Chriſtian who knows and feels and lives agreeably to that? If ſo, the ſcripture is not our only rule. Does the Holy Ghoſt reveal any thing more, than is in his own word, to profeſſors now? Does faith ever come but by hearing or ſome means of information? Is there any ſuch thing, as what we may call a metaphyſical inſpiration in the preſent age, whereby ſentiments are immediately  
infuſed



infused into the mind without the use of the bodily senses? Nay, was there ever? 'Tis presumption, 'tis blasphemy to pretend to it.

### Whims about faith.

Then again there have been such works made with poor faith, that one scarcely knows what to call it. One while 'tis the mouth, or hand, or wing, or feet of regeneration. Then again 'tis considered as a kind of ethereal infusion, which is denominated the principle. This infused principle is represented as producing acts upon acts, in a vast variety of divisions and subdivisions. —A poor man, who was distressed in his mind about his salvation, came not long since to me, and told me his complaints. I heard him with attention and concern. In my reply, I told him he had formed wrong notions of christianity, and stated to him some passages of the New Testament, which the apostles had delivered to men under the same kind of concern. He heard me, but seemed surprised at my counsel. I told him

I could give him no better advice than that, and if he understood and believed it, it would give him some kind of satisfaction and relief directly. Oh! says he, 'tis the scripture, and I believe all that. And dont you then, said I, find it glad tidings, truly gospel to you? No, says he, I am afraid I have not the faith that is saving. Pray then, replied I to him, what do you apprehend saving faith to be? Why, says he, I may compare it to a pipe for the reception of Christ, as that instrument does the water. Now, adds he, I dont find this within me. Then I answered, you expect to feel it, do you? Yes, Sir, said he. Why then, I added, if I could now make you understand and believe all that Jesus and his apostles said, you would not expect to be relieved by it, would you? No to be sure, says he, without faith in the heart, and the receiving Christ's person as well as his word.

I leave the reader to make his own remarks upon this. I could produce numbers of instances more of the same kind. 'Tis no question at all with me, that these gross  
and

and dangerous notions of faith, came originally from the writings of those learned doctors, who have laboured with all their criticism and skill, to make an essential difference between believing the word and testimony of Jesus, and the believing in his person and offices. What, does not he that believes Christ's words, believe him? Does not he that abides in them, abide in the Father and the Son, or rather they in him? Then the scriptures speak not truth.

What was Christ's word or testimony about, but his person, offices and redemption? Every body knows what it is *to believe*, considering its simple sense, as well as what it is *to think*. And any attempts to explain either, would be to confound them. And if persons do not know what it is to believe the gospel savingly, 'tis because they are ignorant of, or see not the evidence for, its glorious contents. I could refer you to numbers of ancient as well as modern authors, who consider faith in this same simple plain manner. But I'll only mention Mr. John Erskine's essays, and a late performance of  
Mr.



Mr. Rotheram's, preacher at Oxford, and, if they are suspected of Sandimianism, I cannot help it. I am sure what they say about it, is scriptural, and sensible, and believe every unprejudiced person will think so \*.

### Silly notions of Regeneration.

I forbear to dwell long upon the gross notion of regeneration, that has been too commonly entertained. Though the most celebrated writers upon that subject, of orthodoxy and sense, have absolutely disavowed the communication of any new natural powers, yet it is too commonly thought, and too much countenanced by ministers, that it is something of a natural and impulsive change of the mental powers, by the almighty energy of the Holy Ghost, without the instrumentality of Gospel truth. Than which I think nothing can be more contrary to the scriptures. " Begotten again by the incor-

\* I would not be understood to approve all Mr. Rotheram's opinions, though I admire him much. 'Tis not a Question with me, whether he hinges a man's acceptance with God, upon what he believes? 'Tis plain he does not.

ruptible seed of the word"——" by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead"——" of his own will begat he us through the word of truth." And the regeneration of the holy spirit preached up to Nicodemus, as is plain from the close of our Lord's discourse, was to be effected by the knowledge of him "as lifted up." The infallible consequence of this gross and unscriptural notion, is to lead some to despair, others to presume. Nothing in the gospel will ever be glad tidings to the former, whilst they conclude, that regeneration is a positive act of mere power upon the soul, which effects a change they must be sensible of, prior to any alteration of views in consequence of the influence of new sentiments. An apostle tells us, and I'll believe him, that he who believes (in the New Testament sense of this expression) that Jesus is the Christ, is born of God.

Aburd notions of the spirit's influences.

Upon this subject there are many ridiculous opinions entertained. It is too generally  
concluded,

concluded, by common people, that these can be known by mere feeling, without the scriptures. But this is impossible. I own they are distinct from the word itself, but they never operate savingly without it. If they do, we may be, nay, are, saved, without the knowledge of Jesus. This, in my opinion, is the very soul of Quakerism, and of all manner of enthusiasm, even to the setting up experience above the scripture \*.

The apostles, nor our Lord himself, ever attempt to explain the modus of the spirit's influences. They can no more be discerned than the operation of air or wind in vegetation. We know that earth and water of themselves, without air, will never vegetate. We also know, that the generality of plants, will not grow by mere air, without earth and water. But I wont say that the vivifying power of God, through the air, could not, if he pleased, cause vegetation. However we know it does not. 'Tis not

\* See a sermon or two, published not many years since, intituled, "The Christian's experience the standard of truth."



his pleasure. 'Tis the same as to the spiritual birth and growth. We find not one of the first christians regenerated, converted, edified, even in the age of miracles, without the conviction and belief of gospel truth. 'Twas this that saved them. They had no other spiritual food. But at the same time we know, this never took effect, without the invisible blessing of God, For Paul might plant and Apollos water, but 'tis God must give the increase.

As then the wind never produces vegetation without earth or water, neither does the spirit regenerate and sanctify us, without the influence of his own revealed truths. —What God *can* do is one thing, what he *does* do is another. Here then we have a certain maxim or standard, to know whether we have the saving influences of the spirit or not. —The sacred scriptures. Let therefore our prayer daily be, in the language of our Lord, “O God, sanctify us, through thy truth, thy word is truth.”

The having his belief and practice, formed upon the gospel, is the only infallible proof, that a person is under the saving influences

fluences of the holy spirit. No emotions, exaltations, depressions, or heart-workings whatsoever, can ever be the evidence of them, without they arise from scripture sentiments.

### Impressions of texts of scripture.

Let me add, the sudden impressions of texts of scripture, without regarding their scope and connexion, the circumstances of the passage, and the characters of them to whom they were first addressed, is another source of the most extravagant flights of enthusiasm. So that 'tis not the divine sentiment in the scripture, that supports and animates, or the spirit that breathes through the truth, but the peculiar mode or way of its being suggested to the mind. Here, here, all the comfort is built. Very fortunately for these mistaken people, they seldom have any but comfortable passages, which their spirit suggests to them. I never met with one, who ever pretended, that what our Lord said of Judas, "It would be better for that man if he had never been born," was ever applied to him by the spirit. Nay, if a low-spirited

rited man should once have this or any other awful text occur to his mind, and conclude it came from the holy spirit; by the maxim I am speaking against, there is no manner of relief for him, despair and misery are unavoidable.

### Catechising of children.

We have a practice among us of catechising our children. I own they ought to be very carefully instructed in the principles of our holy religion. This was a duty with much solemnity enjoined upon the Jews, and it is plainly charged upon christians by the apostles. But were the Jews to teach their children any thing but the word of God? or were christians? Can any human expressions set forth christianity in a clearer light than the words of the Holy Ghost? or, is the faith of young persons more likely to be placed in God or men, by learning first *his* words or *theirs*? I leave this last question to be answered by those who have been taught catechisms in their youth, and who have not been instructed to learn and study whole paragraphs, e-

pistles



pistles and books, in their connection. I really believe it to be my duty to apply myself principally to the latter, with respect to my own children, and leave others to judge for themselves. My own experience tells me, that my parents would have been doing me more real service, by teaching me the epistle to the Romans throughout, and laying that system in the Holy Ghost's own words in my memory, than by loading it with human phrases, most of which were hatch'd in the schools.

#### Conduct and temper of ministers.

Permit me to conclude this long detail, with observing, that the cant and pride of some of our ministers, have principally contributed to this ignorance and enthusiasm.

The setting too high an authority upon their office, their presumptuously thinking themselves the ambassadors of Christ \*, and

\* If ambassadors are those, who receive their commission immediately from their prince, no preachers can pretend to this title, without presumption. If they only lay claim to it, because of their persuading sinners to be reconciled to God, every private christian has a right to it, upon the same footing.

their

their labouring to attach men more to their person and interest, than to the truth as it is in Jesus,—have been too notorious in many. Instead of endeavouring to bring men into subjection to the Lord Jesus alone, as speaking in the New Testament, they have strove to prevent their inquiring and examining, under the notion of avoiding controversy. In their churches they have been insolent, over-bearing, impatient of contradiction. In their conversation, dictatorial, gloomy, positive, nettled at their peoples prying into subjects and expressing their determination to think for themselves.

The faith laboured at by these favourable gentlemen, is a very odd one. 'Tis as mighty a work as Homer's hero's, "Up the high hill he heaved the huge round stone," and if once it be performed, the whole of religion afterwards, is as easy as the truckling of it down again. There must be much tugging, according to them, before a person can come to Christ, or get on his righteousness. For their hearers are not to be justified by a sentimental faith, no, but by a powerful push or exertion of their own.

The

The gospel, the glad tidings of peace to the guilty, let them be believed ever so fully, in all their glorious import, is only an historical speculative faith, and therefore can never give ease to the soul, nor any way influence it to happiness. For shame! for shame! gentlemen, talk no more in this stupid senseless way. Leave Owen and Hufsey, and Watts, and Ridgley, and Doddridge, and others, to their own scholastic distinctions, and follow you the phraseology of the New Testament. Though I cannot think with Palæmon they were a set of wilful corrupters of the gospel, I am far from thinking them infallible any more than I do him. They never pretended to infallibility. Luther was for persecution unto banishment, Calvin for persecution unto death; in this I think them both greatly mistaken, but I dare not damn their persons though I do their principle. I know of no sentiment so diametrically opposite to the genius and spirit of christianity, that the forementioned worthy gentlemen held, and therefore I shall not unchristian them, any more than approve their errors. I leave them to

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their scholastic distinctions, wherein I think they perplex and obscure the faith, and endeavour to follow the phraseology of the New Testament. Let you and me then never revere these, or any worthy characters, further than they breathe the spirit of the pure gospel. They neither of them, were they living, would desire us to follow them further.

It has been too common amongst us to make this the grand end of preaching, either to systemize the congregation, and clothe them with the rusty armour of scholastic divinity, that they may be the furious champions of a party, or else, to produce some strong sensations, and impetuous affections, by warm excitements to seriousness and devotion. The preaching up scripture principles, I would not be understood to object to, and I own, the man who does this, must have a system and a strict one too; but let them appear as much as possible in their native dress, without any of the fopperies and encumbering trinkets of Thomas Aquinas and Dun Scotus. Seriousness and devotion proceeding from right views,

views, I by no means would treat lightly, as I am persuaded there can be no true christian without them. For, as Rochester said, if christianity be true, 'tis the most serious, solemn, thing imaginable. But what I object to, is all manner of devotion, that is not generated and nourished by the pure sentiments of the New Testament. For this must be very dangerous. What was Paul's before his conversion, that led him to persecute beyond measure the church of God? What was Laud's? What was his brethren's the Pharisees in our Lord's time? Did not often many of the devout join, in the most violent opposition against the apostles and their gospel? In short we may justly say of zeal and devotion, as we often do of fire and water, they are very good servants, but exceeding bad masters.

It is not enough then, that preachers deliver sentiments scholastically but scripturally and plainly, so that their hearers may see for themselves they are taken from the inspired book. Nor is it enough for them to excite a spirit of zeal and devotion in their assemblies, but they ought to see to it,

that it be evangelic, the pure effects of scripture principles. I am fully convinced by much observation, that true, lasting, progressive, heart piety and unaffected goodness, only keep pace in societies and individuals with scripture knowledge.

Thus have I briefly stated what I think to be the causes of that declension and unsteadiness that subsists among us. I do not think they are peculiar to our denomination of Dissenters, or that Dissenters are more subject to the chief of these follies, than devout Churchmen. Neither do I affix them to any particular society or individual, because I write not to inflame, but to reform. I have nothing to lose by this publication, unless it be the expence of the press, nor do I write for gain. There is no man that I fear to offend by speaking my sentiments, or any one that I expect to receive a reward from. I fear the terror of no man's censure, nor the tribunal of any board of ministers whatsoever. There is only one I am anxious to please, and that is,



is, the judge of the heart. To him I appeal.

'Tis my happiness now to address societies and ministers, who need not to wait—for an act of parliament—the determination of a convocation—the order of an archbishop or the resolution of a presbytery,—before they attempt a reformation. No—'tis your privilege and your dignity to be independent. Your right of examining, altering and reforming, is in yourselves. And of your ministers it may be said, as was once said of a king of England, they have all the power that can be desired to do good, but none, without the consent of the people, to do harm. I might also add, your professed plan of discipline if followed, would really free you as much from priestcraft, as the Quakers can boast, with the superior advantage of a learned as well as godly ministry.

And here allow me to propose to your consideration the following brief directions, you are to judge of their propriety and importance.

In

In your religious concerns, pursue no other interest than that of the truth and righteousness of the New Testament.

That you may know what they are, read it privately and publicly.

Frequently meet—frequently pray—and frequently converse together about the kingdom of God.

Warn the unruly, comfort the feeble minded, love one another cordially as brethren, and reject the unbelieving and immoral, whether poor or rich.

Let nothing be done through strife or vain glory.

Beware of a Diotrephes.

Place not the strength and glory of your interest in your numbers or riches, but in your faith and purity.

Be not afraid to give up old phrases, customs and practices, if they are unscriptural, or to reject new ones if they are without the sacred sanction.

Avoid—carefully avoid, the traditions of the elders.

Believe no man, and be influenced by no man, in your religion, however serious, devout,

vout, and learned, without a Thus saith the Lord.

Take care of false experience and devotion, and try the spirits whether they be of God by the only infallible test.

Seek not so much to condemn other parties and characters, as to know, believe, and do, the will of God yourselves.

Let ministers renounce the hidden things of dishonesty—not walk in craftiness—never handle the word of God deceitfully, and only commend themselves to every man's conscience, by a manifestation of the truth, in their conversation, preaching, and lives.

Let the people revere them highly for their work's sake, readily deal out unto them of their temporals for their easy and comfortable support, but never intrust their consciences or too much influence and power with them. They are but fallible men. They deserve respect no further than they profess and live the truth. And doing this, they can never be too much valued.

Be



Be very solicitous to provide for the poor, yet take care of admitting any, who come only for the loaves and fishes.

Lay not a stress upon any thing not found in revelation, and treat nothing as trifling that is found there.

Expect no new revelation, and treat that you have, as an appeal to that principle of intelligence God has given you.

Finally—In all things let every man act as in the sight of an omniscient God.

Such a scriptural reformation as I propose, will I know meet with many obstacles.

In most of our congregations there are men, who are grown callous in school divinity and mystic devotion. For them to give up their gods, would be almost a miracle; my insisting so much upon scripture-knowledge will not suit these. And I expect my letter will have no other influence on them, than to excite their pious clamour and devout censures. Let them rave on.

More powerful enemies still will be your system-shackled tutors and leading men, whose influence and authority among the religious, principally depend, upon the perplexing,

plexing, muddling, mystical way of stating faith, regeneration, and the spirit's influences. Their indignation will be fired. And most likely it will burst forth in loud explosions of anathema. Or if not, artful insinuations shall be given out, that the writer of this letter is no friend to the congregational churches, but a fower of sedition amongst them. But judge thou, reader, between us, and believe neither of us without evidence. I have no dominion over thy conscience, nor ought they. Hear Christ and his apostles, and if we speak not, and act not, according to them, treat us as deceivers.

Your methodistical folks will object to this reformation in our societies, because it will prevent their rambling, and throw cold water upon the fire of their enthusiasm. Tell them, if they'll not submit to the order and discipline of God's house, the religion they have embraced, is not that in the New Testament. This consists more in progressive knowledge and goodness, than in temporary raptures and feelings.

The last and most formidable opposers of any attempts for reformation amongst ourselves,

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selves, will, I presume, be the Glassites. But here let it be observed concerning them, that I should be glad to see something of the same zeal for religion, and affection for one-another in our assemblies, as is visible amongst them. And I say of them, to you, in the language of Gamaliel, refrain from reproaching and malignantly opposing these people, and leave them to worship their God in their own way; for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought; but if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it. Let us reason with them out of the scriptures, but never persecute them with our tongues or in any other way. Let 'em condemn us and welcome; surely their solemn censures cannot shut us out of heaven, if we are found in the faith and practice of the gospel.

The principal aim of these people in their conversation with others, seems to terminate in this, that unless you join them, you cannot profess and live christianity in its purity. I appeal to any, that have been conversant with them, for the truth of this. Now might I not ask, where Mr. Glass, when



when he was turned out of the Kirk, about forty years ago, and his adherents, had the authority to form themselves according to what they thought the plan of the New Testament? Did their elders receive their commission from any others, who had it in a lineal succession from the apostles? absurd! ridiculous in the highest degree to suppose it. Why then should it not be as possible and practicable, by the blessing of God, for any society of professors, to reform and govern themselves according to the light of the New Testament now, as it was at first for them? Presbyterian and congregational doctors and pastors, have supposed, they have a right of inducting ministers into the office of bishops or elders, but where they derived it from, I am at a loss to know. Not from the scriptures I'm sure, for there is not one instance as I can recollect, of an ordinary pastor or bishop, ordaining another, in a church to which he did not belong. And I think the Sandimanian elders have no more authority in this matter than they have.

Their admission of no measure of forbearance, I think is absolutely repugnant to the doctrine and practice of the apostles. For they exhorted christians to receive one-another in love, when they differed about meats and days. They never insisted upon unanimity in these matters, and yet both could not be equally right. Paul knew and was persuaded by the Lord Jesus Christ, that nothing was unclean of itself, yet he says, that to him that accounted a thing unclean, it was unclean, Rom. xiv. 14. 1 Tim. iv. 4. Matt. xv. 11. He was a Jew, and therefore must think his brethren wrong, in insisting upon a distinction of meats. Yet he was not for excommunicating them. To say he indulged the Jews, because their dispensation was wearing away, is to say, that he allowed of forbearance. Or to say, it was right for the Jews to observe days and meats, and not for the Gentiles, would be to say, that there was not the same rule of action for both. If therefore, when christianity was established in churches, near thirty years after our Lord's ascension, and, most likely, with greater

greater purity than it has been since—the apostles allowed of forbearance, and exhorted to mutual love and affection notwithstanding these differences,—why should there not be the same forbearance now, to some persons who in a few respects differ about eating of blood, baptism, &c? 'Tis answered, the apostolic decree is clear and explicit, and there must be no reasoning against it. But let me add, the apostolic exhortation is as clear and explicit for mutual forbearance, and there must be no reasoning then about this.

Was not the decree of the apostles, Acts xv. and repeated chap. xxi. occasioned by the disputes between the believing Jews and believing Gentiles at Antioch? Was not the intention of it to promote peace and harmony? It seemed good to the church, apostles, and the Holy Ghost, to injoin those things as included in the decree, as the only necessary matters to obtain that end. It could not be, that these were all the necessary things for the believing Gentiles to practice, fornication was before and afterwards prohibited, I acknowledge, but we find not  
the



the abstaining from blood and things strangled, ever hinted at in any of the epistles. As to the apostle's decree being hinted at in the revelation twice, no man would ever suspect it, that was not reading to find passages for a particular purpose. Mr. Glas's authority here is not sufficient with me. If they can in their consciences, condemn a man as an unbeliever, who really looks upon this decree as temporary, notwithstanding they find him rejoicing in the saving truth, loving the brethren, and doing good to all men, I allow them their liberty, but abhor their presumptuous severity. O my soul! come not thou into their counsels.

In short the society, which allows of no variation of opinion, must necessarily prevent freedom of inquiry into the scriptures, and tempt the poor and ignorant to put an implicit confidence in their authority. A consequence so horrible to me, that I cannot join with any church that directly or indirectly countenances it.

“ An excommunicated person is to be received into the church but once more, because there is no instance of a third reception  
tion

tion of the same person ; and because it is impossible we should obtain a fuller evidence of his repentance, than that which he has given before." Human ! arbitrary ! unscriptural ! let these professed scripturalists look to Matt. xviii. 21, 22. and Luke xvii. 3, 4. and blush. Our Lord in the former passage, had been speaking of church-censures. In the last mentioned place, a brother might repent seven times and be forgiven. What, did our Lord encourage six hypocritical repentances ? Does he intimate that either of them might be so ?——Should this be supposed to be a case that respects individuals, it is not less in point. For if an individual, is to forgive a penitent brother seven times, why not a church ?——If the maxim I am arguing against, be not an addition to the scriptures, and an appointment of men, then there is none in the Roman church.

" An elder or bishop must not marry again." Why ? " because he must be the man of one woman." " It cannot mean his having one wife at a time, because this was prohibited a private member."

Is

Is it not a known fact, that polygamy was common among the Greeks?—That they often took more than one wife, and then for trifling reasons divorced them? or at least for such as were not allowed by revelation.

Now it is plain to me, the meaning of it is, that he should be the husband of one wife at the same time, having no other that he had divorced, which a private member might have, having taken them before his conversion. So also, she that was called to the office of a widow, was to be one, who had not lived (having been divorced) with two husbands, whilst they were both living.

But not to insist on this, why should we suppose, that in the character of a bishop, his being the husband of one wife, should be more peculiar to him, than the rest of his qualifications? Was a private member allowed to be a wine-bibber, covetous, greedy of filthy lucre, any more than a bishop? Was he not to bring up *his children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord*, or to have them in subjection, as well as an elder?

There



There is nothing in scripture or reason, that can oppose, universally, second marriages in bishops or deacons. 'Tis a mere whim, taken first of all, from a false construction of one of those spurious, though ancient canons, called that of the apostles.

It is very probable from 1 Cor. vii. 7, 8. that the apostle was a widower. The *αγαμοι* there, were undoubtedly widowers, as the word is often used by other authors. And the apostle, not the Lord, advises them to continue even as he was. When he addresses the *παρθενοι*, male and female virgins, he reckons not himself with them, ver. 25. Yet the apostle in chap. ix. 5. asserts his right of marrying, and of having a support from the churches, as the brethren of the Lord and Cephas had. He never supposes it would have been contrary to his apostolic character.

Where is scriptural authority for the necessity of two elders, in every act of church discipline, and the administration of the Lord's supper?

Do these gentlemen read the book of Canticles, the tenth of Nehemiah, the 24th,

25th, 26th, 27th, and beginning of the 28th chapters of the book of Exodus, in their public assemblies? Do they understand them all themselves, much less the common people?

How a truly faithful, holy, Anabaptist, many of whom I know and believe to be such, though not of their opinion, must necessarily disbelieve and deny the sovereignty of divine grace, I have not eyes to see, nor a capacity to understand. What, do they damn all that die in infancy? I never heard they did. Or do the Glaslites say, that all whom they baptize in infancy, will infallibly be saved? Let them show me, if they do, their authority.

But a bold assertion, and a positive determination, confirmed by a solemn censure, is one of the best weapons these gentlemen use, about church matters. It has great influence with the vulgar.

The summ of all is this, the allowing of difference of opinion in these matters, is contrary to the unity exhorted to: this is the grand argument, which supports the whole fabric of their discipline. To which

I answer. The allowing of any imperfections whatsoever in the brethren I commune with, is wrong, because 'tis contrary to the exhortation, be ye holy, even as your Father, who is in heaven, is holy. So that if a man tells me he has the least variation of heart at any time from God, I must condemn him. For the precept is, be thou perfect or holy, even as thy Father, who is in heaven is perfect.—But let me tell the Glassites, if the poorest person in the faith, of my acquaintance, should need it and require it, I'll wash his feet, in obedience to the command and example of Jesus. And further, if it appeared to me by any unquestionable examples, that it was a church ordinance, I would readily submit to it, as I do to the Lord's supper.

Nay, I will add, if there were any miraculous sicknesses, as there were undoubtedly in the apostolic age \* now in churches, I would call the elders of the church, as James directs, join with them in anointing the person with oyl, and doubt not but the prayer of faith would save his life. But in common sick-

\* Cor. xi. 30.

nesses,



nesses, I have no ground for any such faith, if I had, I should be for keeping any of my religious friends from the grave, whenever they were ill.

If the apostle was now to have written to a number of American savages in the faith, I cannot say that he would have recommended it to them, to have lighted the pipe of love, as this is the highest token of intimate friendship amongst them. But I really question, whether he would have made the holy kiss an absolute term of communion in a British church, where 'tis counted in general, rather indecent, for men to kiss men.

Let then the nostrums and innovations of this new sect, my brethren, neither perplex nor alarm you. What you see in them right, follow, their inventions and additions, reject. There is no necessity for you to condemn Wickliff, Hufs, Luther, Calvin, the Bohemian brethren and Waldenses, which, I cannot see, how you can avoid doing, if you join them, and think them right. None of them were so severely forbearing,

forbearing, as the Glaslites are. There was indeed an inconsiderable body of Menonites in Germany, who set off upon the unbearing scheme the Glaslites are upon, but their reign was but short—very short. I pretend not to predict their fate.

Upon the whole, if there be any thing in this letter just, listen to it. Wherein you think I am wrong, receive it not. And may the God of truth and peace, stir up you and me, to do what we can, by our profession, faith and practice, to recommend and inforce, the pure religion of the New Testament. Amen.

This was my intention in writing this letter, and shall be my daily prayer.

I am yours most faithfully,

May 19th,  
1766.

AN INDEPENDENT.

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